YEHUDA HALEVI

(c. 1075–1141)

An unrivaled master of Hebrew and its prosody, Yehuda HaLevi is perhaps the most famous and certainly the most revered of all the medieval poets. "The quintessence and embodiment of our country . . . our glory and leader, illustrious scholar, unique and perfect devotee," is how an 1130 letter from the Cairo Geniza describes him, and his reputation has faded little since. Born near the border between Christian and Muslim Spain (some say in Toledo, others Tudela, and still others neither of the two), HaLevi, it seems, traveled to Granada as a teenager, at the invitation of Moshe Ibn Ezra, whom he had impressed with a poem. The self-described "immigrant from Christendom" lived in the Muslim south for several years. By the time the North African Almoravids assumed control of Andalusia in 1090, bringing great hardship upon Andalusia's Jews, HaLevi had already begun to wander, and he lived, it seems, for a while under Almoravid rule in Seville, Lucena, or Cordoba. Like many other Andalusian Jewish refugees, he eventually made his way north to Castile, which was then ruled by the tolerant King Alfonso VI, who allowed Jews to take up the professions of their choosing and even participate in the administration of the kingdom. The beginning of the twelfth century finds HaLevi settled in Toledo. Earning a living as a physician, he attended to Castilian court circles, though the practice brought him little gratification: "I busy myself at an hour that is neither day nor night with the vanities of medicine," he wrote to a friend. " 'We heal Babel, but it is beyond healing' " (Jeremiah 51:9). He also engaged in trade and was active in Jewish communal affairs. Following the political murder in 1108 of the nephew of his Jewish patron, Yosef Ferrizu'el (Cidellus, or the Little Cid), who had been close to the Christian king, HaLevi became disillusioned with his situation at court. A few months later, when Alfonso himself died, anti-Jewish rioting broke out. What happened to HaLevi at this point is hard to say, but it appears that he left Toledo and again traveled from town to town before settling for a while in Cordoba with his wife and their daughter. Throughout these years he witnessed the devastation of Jewish communities by Christian and Muslim forces alike, and the events of his day shaped his emerging nationalist (or as Salo Baron has called it, "racialist") consciousness.

HaLevi is an important piece of the Spanish-Hebrew cultural puzzle not only for his achievements, which are major, but because in the course of his career he

came to develop far-reaching reservations about the adoption of Arabic poetics and all they implied. By midlife he had rejected the Andalusian cultural ideal altogether, though he expressed that rejection through masterful employment of the Andalusian forms. "And don't be taken by Greek wisdom, /which bears no fruit, but only blossoms," he writes. More sanguine in temperament than any of the other major poets of the period, he seems to have kept at least the courtly dimension of his work as a poet in perspective. When Levi Ibn Altabbaan implied in a poem that he, HaLevi, was a dedicated professional poet who earned a living from his art, HaLevi replied: "If wisdom is like the expanse of the sea, /poetry's rhymes are its breakers' foam. / Writing isn't a wall to break through; /diversion for masters is the making of poems." A treatise he wrote on Hebrew meter c. 1129 shows him returning to essential questions about the Andalusian revolution that had been raised by Dunash's opponents at the beginning of the period. And in the last fifteen years of his life, even as he continued to compose in the classical Andalusian style, he began experimenting with an alternative poetics that would de-Arabize Hebrew verse and return it to exclusively Jewish sources.

In the summer of 1140, HaLevi set sail for the Holy Land, hoping to pray at Judaism's holiest places. (More than one scholar has suggested that he made his pilgrimage because Jewish life in the Holy Land, including perhaps the gathering of a group of priests to perform the cultic rites on the Mount of Olives, near the site of the former Temple, would—according to his worldview—have accelerated the redemption and brought about the revelation of the Shekhina.) Unable to free himself from the lure of the Andalusian modes, he engaged in an intensive final bout of composition on the sea and while wintering in Egypt, where he was regaled as a celebrity by the local literati and socialites, and also besieged by friends pleading with him not to risk the extremely dangerous journey to Crusader-held Palestine. All in all he spent some eight months in Alexandria and Fustat (Old Cairo), as he prepared for the second leg of his trip. Initially, it seemed, he was going to take the overland route through the desert, but when those plans were thwarted, he had to wait for the gentler spring winds that would carry him across the final stretch of the Mediterranean to the port of Acre, from which he would journey by land to Jerusalem. He was last heard from in a poem written aboard ship just outside Alexandria's port in mid-May of 1141.

His more conventional secular lyrics apart—some of which are quietly haunting—the poetry HaLevi wrote is prized for its fusion of a pure Hebrew lyricism and religio-historical concerns. It is, however, only when either crisis or loss enters his work that the secular poems rise to the level of major poetry—as in his poem of friendship to Moshe Ibn Ezra, his meditations on aging and the worth of his work in the world, and the sui generis poems he wrote on his journey away from Spain. Beyond that, some have argued that HaLevi's real greatness

lies in his liturgical poetry, where his effortless command of the language comes into perfect conjunction with his subject. Throughout that sacred verse one feels the tremendous force of the poetry's currency and the spell of its fluency; at the same time, HaLevi's temperament lends his lines a combination of tranquility and clarity that is in many ways unique in the literature. Ironically, we find this most nationalistic of all the major medieval Hebrew writers incorporating Sufi or Shi'ite devotional elements, such as the notion of total surrender before the divine (*tawakkul*)—perhaps because he knew it would speak to his peers, but clearly because it spoke to him.

HaLevi is also the author of one of the period's major (and most widely read) works of prose, *The Book of the Kuzari: Defense of a Despised Faith (Kitaab al-Khazari: Kitaab al-Radd wa-l-Daliil fi l-Diin al-Dhaliil)*, which was written in Arabic and completed during the last decade or so of his life. Seeking guidance in matters of religion, a fictional Khazar king summons representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths, along with a philosopher, to present their beliefs to him. The king soon comes to the conclusion that the spokesman for rabbinic Judaism is the most convincing of the four, and the remainder of the book involves his asking questions that allow the Jewish representative to hold forth on the tenets of his faith. At the end, the Jewish scholar announces that he is leaving for the Holy Land. Recent readings of the book argue that its essential purpose was, as Ross Brann has put it, "to undermine the attachment to Sefarad among the culturally sophisticated Jews."

THAT NIGHT A GAZELLE

That night a gazelle
    of a girl showed me the sun
of her cheek and veil
        of auburn hair,
like ruby over
    a moistened crystal brow,
she looked like dawn's
        fire rising—
reddening clouds with flames.

A DOE WASHES

A doe washes her clothes
in the stream of my tears
and sets them out to dry
in the glow of her glory—

she doesn't need the spring's
water, with my
two eyes, or the sun's
rays with her splendor.

IF ONLY DAWN

If only dawn would hurry along with the wind
that kisses her lips and sways her form,
and if the clouds would carry my greetings to her—
her heart just like her hips would soften.

My doe, who has chosen to dwell on high with the Bear,
have mercy on one who would fly to a star.

THAT DAY WHILE I HAD HIM

That day while I had him on my knees
he saw himself there in my eyes and tried
to trick me. He kissed them ever so lightly—
kissing himself, not me. . . .

ANOTHER APPLE

You bound me, doe of delight, in your beauty
and in that captivity worked me ruthlessly.
Since parting came between us that day,
nothing I've seen has matched your grace.

And so I turn to an apple for succor
    whose fragrance recalls your breath like myrrh—
its shape, your breast, and its color the flush
    that races through your cheeks when you blush.

TO IBN AL-MUʿALLIM

Gently, my hard-hearted, slender one,
be gentle with me and I'll bow before you.
I've ravished you only in looking—
my heart is pure, but not my eyes:
They'd gather from your features
the roses and lilies mingled there.
I'd lift the fire from your cheeks
to put out fire with fire,
and then when I was thirsty,
it's there I'd look for water.
I'd savor the lip that glows like ruby—
like coals in the tongs of my jaws.
My life hangs by scarlet threads;
my death is now concealed in dusk. . . .
I find that nights have no end,
where once no dark divided my days:
For Time then was clay in my hands
and Fortune—the potter's wheel.

IF ONLY I COULD GIVE

If only I could give
    myself in ransom for that fawn
who served me honeyed wine
    between two scarlet lips . . .

I think of all that pleasure
the best of months gone by,
a time when in my arms
the sun's brother would lie;
my chalice was his mouth—
I drained its ruby dry.
And love's hand between us
sustained me in my love;
love's hand brought us near
and never did me harm.

The blame then is mine,
not his who stole my heart,
and yet my pain was great
the day that I departed
from his tents despite
his pleas that I stay on.
But Time's thread led me out,
and onward to another;
Time despised me so,
it saw to my departure.

The Red Sea, my friends,
was parched beside my weeping,
and for my heart, my eyes
had not the least compassion,
from the day my footsteps
fell on foreign soil . . .
Sorrow in my eye
formed a second sea—
I feared that it would drown me
and no one pull me free.

In David I forgot all this,
and thinking of his favors,
I offer up these verses
a necklace in his honor,
rebuking Time, which hounds me,
increasing now my power.

My sword grows drunk with Time's
blood which leaves me thirsty—
Time would drive me out,
but clearly doesn't know me.

A dove nesting there
in the myrtle now is watching,
as I prepare my song,
as I complain of Time;
her voice gently calls—
like a girl who's singing:
In the end I'll win—
loving once was fun;
leave Time to Ibn
al-Dayyeni's son.

EPITHALAMIUM

The stars of earth are joined today—
a pair unrivaled in the hosts of heaven.
Even the Pleiades envy this union,
for breath itself can't come between them.

The light of the East has reached the West
and among its Many has found the One.
Above us he spread a canopy of grace—
set for them, like a tent for the sun.

WHEN A LONE SILVER HAIR

When a lone silver hair appeared on my head
I plucked it out with my hand, and it said:

"You've beaten me one on one—
but what will you do with the army to come?"

IF TIME

If Time today provides you with shelter,
know it can also become your snare.
The arrow's aided by feathers from wings
that guided the eagle as it glided through air.

INSCRIPTIONS ON BOWLS

I

Handsome one, open your eyes and see
this fine piece of meat on which you should chew—
before it's noticed and eaten up
by the person sitting beside you.

II

Brother of kindness—whose hands stretch out
to guests like a cloud with your bounty:
fill me with food to warm their hearts—
for they're extremely hungry.

FOUR RIDDLES

I

Evincing the infinite—
the size of your palm—
what it holds is beyond you,
curious, at hand.

II

What's slender, smooth and fine,
and speaks with power while dumb,
in utter silence kills,
and spews the blood of lambs?

III

What's cast dead to the ground
and buried naked with dung,
then comes to life in its grave,
giving birth to fully clothed young?

IV

What cries without an eyelid or eye
and weeping makes all glad—
and when it's happy, and sheds no tears,
with joy makes men sad?

DEPARTURE

Night, be long and linger
before my friends' departure:
gently spread your black
wing across the glow
of dawn—and turn, tears,
to rain to keep them from going.
Heart's grief, cloud
the sky with dark so they'll
not see the light of morning.
May my sighs then stir
the sun's flames to strike them—
until at last they fathom
that they can leave my tents
only once I've blessed them.

ON FRIENDSHIP AND TIME

(to Moshe Ibn Ezra)

We've known you, parting, ever since we were young,
and the river of weeping that runs between us is ancient.
What good would it do to fight against blameless Fortune,
or quarrel with days, when they have done no wrong?
The heavens' spheres race along fixed courses,
and nothing on high ever departs from its path.
Could this be news—when nothing new comes into
a world whose laws are drawn by the hand of God?
How could its ways be blamed by us or altered,
when all is sealed with a signet worn by the Lord,
when each beginning circles back as an end,
and everything under the sun has already been?
Men are brought together, but only to part,
to yield from a single nation manifold nations:
earth's peoples would never have scattered across it
if humankind had not known separation.
A thing can sometimes bring both good and harm:
one man's potion in another's bones is poison;
men fly into a rage, cursing the day,
detesting each of its doomed and loathsome moments,
while elsewhere others that instant are counting their blessings,
passing the hours in perfect peace and contentment.
Food in the mouth of a healthy man is honey;
honey on the tongue of the sick is bitter as broom.
Lights go dark in the eyes of one who is troubled—
they shine on, but he can't see through the gloom—
like mine on the day a dark cloud descended
and Moshe left, as streams began to fall
for one who was always a fountain of wisdom for me,
in whose words I'd found a mine of gold.
Friendship bound my soul inside his soul,
while parting's chariots stood at a distance unharnessed.
Fate was with us in fullness of spirit then—
and I had yet to know departure's pain.

Though destiny brought us into the world in division,
  love in her household raised us together as twins,
and we grew up by beds of the sweetest spices,
  at the breast of the vine's daughter drinking our fill.
I think of you here on hills that now divide us—
  beside you once, they were mountains of herbs—
and with that memory, my eyelids start to moisten,
  and my eyes redden, flushed with the blood of love.
All that comes back to me . . . the years we passed
  living as if we were one inside a dream,
till Time betrayed me, and in your stead sent men
  who spoke of peace, but planned only for war.
I'd speak with them and find in all they said
  your precious manna replaced by garlic and straw.
Anger within me rose facing these fools—
  who put on airs as though they were truly wise:
challenged, they called their fraud and fickleness faith,
  and mocked my faith as a casting of spells and lies.
And so they sow and harvest their meager crop,
  taking delight in their blasted and shriveled corn—
forgetting that wisdom's exterior often resembles
  a vessel of clay holding precious stones.
But I have lamps to search the innermost chambers,
  and from these hidden places lift out gems;
I will not rest until I've seen their sheaves
  in their wisdom bowing down to mine.
I'll say to boors who seek to know the mysteries:
  What good are golden rings in the snouts of swine?
Why should I press my clouds to drop their rain
  on seedless land, whose fields have not been plowed?
My soul's need of Fortune in fact is slight,
  like spirit's need for bodies God designed:
so long as they contain it, it fills them with life—
  but when they weary, like husks they're left behind.

SLAVES OF TIME

The slaves of time are slaves of a slave,
only the servant of the Lord is free;
therefore, as others seek their portion,
"My portion," says my soul, "is with Thee."

HEAL ME, LORD

Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed.
Don't let me perish in your anger.
All my balms and potions are yours
to guide to weakness or to vigor.

It's you alone who chooses, not me;
you know best what's flawed and pure.
It isn't my medicine on which I rely—
I look instead toward your cure.

TRUE LIFE

I run to the source of the one true life,
turning my back to all that is empty and vain.
My only hope is to see the Lord, my king—
apart from Him I fear and worship nothing.

If only I might see Him—at least in a dream—
I'd sleep forever, so the dream would never end.
If I could see his face in my heart's chamber,
I'd never need to look outside again.

THE MORNING STARS

The morning stars sing out to you,
for their glory and splendor derive from yours;
and the angels of God stand guard above them,
forever exalting the name of their Lord.
And the holy assembly follows in turn,
rising to reach your house at dawn.

HIS THRESHOLDS

Seek the Lord and His thresholds, my soul:
offer your songs like incense before Him.
For if you're pursuing the vapors of Time
and calling their spells and sorcery Truth,
and roaming in search of them night and day,
and sleeping sweetly after their feasts—

know that your hand holds nothing at all
but a tree whose branches soon will wither.
Be before your God and King,
beneath whose wings you've come for shelter.
Let His name be hallowed and praised
by all through whom His breath still moves.

WHERE WILL I FIND YOU

Where, Lord, will I find you:
your place is high and obscured.
And where
won't I find you:
your glory fills the world. . . .

I sought your nearness:
with all my heart I called you.
And in my going
out to meet you,
I found you coming toward me.

YOU KNEW ME

You knew me long before you formed me,
and while your spirit is in me you guard me.
Can I stand if you choose to drive me away?
Can I move if you choose to stop me?
What could I say? My thoughts are yours.
What can I do until you help me?
I seek you now in an hour of grace:
Set your favor as a shield about me.
Rouse me to seek out your holy shrine.
Wake me—to bless your name.

A DOE FAR FROM HOME

That graceful doe so far from her home
is laughing although her beloved is angry.
Her laughter's aimed at the daughters of Edom
and Hagar—who long for him with envy.

How could desert asses compare
to a doe who leaned once on her hart?
Where are their prophecies? Where is their lamp?
Where is His Presence above the Ark?

Don't seek, my foes, to smother this love,
whose flame your envy only fans.

A DOVE IN THE DISTANCE

A dove in the distance fluttered,
  flitting through the forest—
    unable to recover
she flew up, flustered, hovering,
  circling round her lover.
    She'd thought the thousand
years to the Time of the End
  about to come, but was
    confounded in her designs,
and tormented by her lover,
  over the years was parted
    from Him, her soul descending
bared to the world below.
  She vowed never again
    to mention His name, but deep
within her heart it held,
  as though a fire burning.
    Why be like her foes?
Her bill opens wide
  toward the latter rain
    of your salvation; her soul
within her faith is firm,
  and she does not despair,
    whether she is honored
through His name or whether
  in disdain brought low.
Let God, our Lord, come
  and not be still: Around Him
    storms of fire flame.

YOU SLEPT, THEN TREMBLING ROSE

You dozed and slept, then trembling rose:
What is this dream that you have dreamed?
Perhaps the vision showed you your foes,
weakened and humbled, with you supreme?
Tell Hagar's son: Draw in the hand
you raised in pride and anger over
Sarah's child—for I've seen you shamed.
Maybe on waking you'll be ruined,
and the year of the crushing end will come
to bring down all your grand designs—

you who were called a wild ass
of a man—then honored for your power;
you whose mouth had spoken of greatness,
who fought against the heavens' saints—
the creature whose feet were made of iron
and clay, to be raised at the end of days.
Perhaps He'll strike with havoc's stone,
and you'll be paid—for all you've done.

LOVE'S DWELLING

From time's beginning you were love's dwelling;
wherever you dwelled, my love would rest.
My rivals' taunts are sweet through your Name:
they torture one whom you have tortured,
and because they learned their wrath from you
I love them for hounding one you've stricken.
Since you scorned me I've scorned myself,
for how could I honor what earns your disdain,
until—indignation passes . . . and you send
redemption to a people you once redeemed.

LORD,

all my desire is here before you,
whether or not I speak of it:
I'd seek your favor, for an instant, then die—
if only you would grant my wish.
I'd place my spirit in your hand,
then sleep—and in that sleep find sweetness.

I wander from you—and die alive;
the closer I cling—I live to die.
How to approach I still don't know,
nor on what words I might rely.
Instruct me, Lord: advise and guide me.
Free me from my prison of lies.

Teach me while I can bear the affliction—
do not, Lord, despise my plea;
before I've become my own burden
and the little I am weighs on me,
and against my will, I give in
as worms eat bones that weary of me.

I'll come to the place my forefathers reached,
and by their place of rest find rest.
Earth's back to me is foreign;
my one true home is in its dust.
Till now my youth has done what it would:
When will I provide for myself?

The world He placed in my heart has kept me
from tending to my end and after.
How could I come to serve my Lord,
when I am still desire's prisoner?
How could I ask for a place on high,
when I know the worm will be my sister?

How at that end could my heart be glad,
when I do not know what death will bring?
Day after day and night after night
reduce the flesh upon me to nothing.
Into the winds they'll scatter my spirit.
To dust they'll return the little remaining.

What can I say—with desire my enemy,
from boyhood till now pursuing me:
What is Time to me but your Will?
If you're not with me, what will I be?
I stand bereft of any virtue:
only your justice and mercy shield me.

But why should I speak, or even aspire?
Lord, before you is all my desire.

IF ONLY I COULD BE

If only I could be
a slave to God who made me;
though others drive me away,
He always draws me near.

My shepherd, my creator,
you formed my frame and soul,
you've understood my mind,
you've seen all that it holds.
You circumscribe my ways,
my wandering and repose.
If you came to help me,
who could cast me down?
And if you hold me back,
who would set me free?

My heart within me yearns
to have you draw it near,
but all my cares just drive it
further from you still.

My road, now, has turned
far from your own will.
Lord, my God, instruct me,
guide me on your path,
and lead me gently into
judgment: don't condemn me.

If I, within my youth,
am slow to bring you pleasure,
what then in decline
could I expect or hope for?
Heal me, Lord, heal me—
my cure's with you alone.
When old age roots me out
and strength no longer knows me—
My Rock, O my Lord,
please, do not forsake me.

Abject and weak I'll sit,
at every moment trembling,
naked, I'll go stripped,
vain in my delusion,
bruised within my sin,
wounded in transgression.
Between us now my trespass
has raised a great divide,
and so I'm kept from seeing
your light with my own eyes.

Incline my heart to offer
in service of your kingdom,
and purify my thoughts
to bring me toward your heaven.
In my hour of pain
come quickly with your healing.
Hear me, now, my Lord,
don't withdraw or hurt me.
Redeem me once again—
and tell me: *Here I am*.

WON'T YOU ASK, ZION

Won't you ask, Zion,
how your captives are faring—
this last remnant of your flock who seek
your peace with all their being?
From west and east, from north and south—
from those near and far,
from all corners—accept these greetings,
and from desire's captive, this blessing.
He offers his tears like dew upon
the slopes of Galilee's mountain
and longs to shed them upon your hills.
I wail like a jackal for your affliction,
but when I dream of your captives' return
I am a lute to your songs and hymns.
My heart yearns for the Lord's home,
for Peniel, and Mahana'im,
all the places where your pure ones appeared—
there the Lord's Presence dwelled,
and He who formed you opened your gates
and the glory of God alone was your beacon:
you needed neither the sun nor moon.
Where God's spirit came to your chosen
I'd pour out before you my spirit and soul—
for you are the kingdom's sacred foundation,
the threshold and house of God, my Lord,
though slaves now sit on your princes' thrones.
If only I could wander where
He was revealed to your heralds and seers.
Who would make me wings to go there?
I'd take my broken heart to your hills,
and fall, my face to your ground, with desire
delighting in your dust and stones.
How much more when I reach Hebrón
and the cave and tombs of my fathers!

I'd pass through your forests and fields;
in Gilead I would stand astonished,
on Mount Abarim and also Mount Hor
where the two great lights taught and shone.
Your air is life to my soul, your dust
sweeter than myrrh—your rivers are nectar.
Walking barefoot over the ruins
of your shrine, naked, would be my pleasure,
there where your ark of the law was hidden
and the cherubs lay in your innermost chamber.
I'd cut off my hair and give up its glory,
and curse Time that deigned to defile
your saints in the holy land it profaned.
How could eating and drinking please me
when dogs are dragging about your lions?
How could the light of day be sweet
when I see your eagles in the beaks of ravens?
Let grief's cup be gentle with me,
let it be poured out more slowly—
for suffering has already come to fill me.
For Oholáh, I drink down your wrath;
with Oholíbah, I reach your dregs.
Zion, perfection of beauty,
bound in love and the Lord's mercy,
as your souls' assembly to you were bound—
they who were happy in your peace,
then came to grief over your ruin
and now bewail your devastation.
From captivity's well they've striven to reach you
and bow at your gates, each in his fashion.
The flocks of your masses in exile scattered,
although your walls were not forgotten.
Those who clung to your robes strove
to climb and touch your palm tree's branches.
Could Shinar and Patros stand by your signs?
Could their vanity ever match your greatness?
Who could be likened to your anointed?
Who to your singers and prophets and priests?
The kingdoms of idols will utterly vanish;
your wealth is forever, your crown endures.

You've sought to be a throne for your Lord—
and happy are they whose place is secure,
who draw near to dwell in those courts.
Happy is he who waits and reaches
then watches your light ascend as dawn
breaks across his body and soul
and, as your chosen people flourish,
rejoices—in your joy at your youth restored.

MY HEART IS IN THE EAST

My heart is in the East—
and I am at the edge of the West.
How can I possibly taste what I eat?
How could it please me?
How can I keep my promise
or ever fulfill my vow,
when Zion is held by Edom
and I am bound by Arabia's chains?
I'd gladly leave behind me
all the pleasures of Spain—
if only I might see
the dust and ruins of your Shrine.

HOW LONG WILL YOU LIE

How long will you lie asleep in childhood's dream?
Know that youth like chaff will be cast off.
Could the black hair of boyhood last forever?
Rise, see how the silver heralds rebuke you.
Shake off Time, as birds shake off the dew
and damp of night. Soar and glide like a swallow
to freedom from falseness, and days that rage like seas.
Pursue your King, at one with the souls' assembly—
which glows and towards His goodness and bounty streams.

HEART AT SEA

Are you still chasing youth past fifty,
    your days about to take wing—
as you turn from the service of God
    and yearn for the service of men?
Would you leave the One within reach
    of all and seek out the Many?
Slow to prepare for your journey,
    would you sell your share for stew?
Hasn't your soul been sated
    with wanting that's always renewed?
Leave its counsel for God's—
    and from your senses keep far;
try to appease your Creator
    with your dwindling hours,
but don't let heart deceive you,
    or seek out charms and spells.
Be like a lion to please Him
    and swift as a young gazelle—
your heart at sea won't fail
    though mountains crumble and fall,
and the sailors' hands grow weary,
    as the soothsayers all go still.
Journeying east they're happy;
    turning back they're ashamed.
The ocean alone is your refuge;
    you have nowhere to turn,
as sails flap and flutter
    and the planks move swiftly along,
and the winds toy with the water,
    like threshers of wheat with straw.
Now they flatten it out—
    now it's raised in heaps.
Mounting it looks like a lion;
    receding it writhes like snakes.

Without a charmer the latter
pursues the former and kills;
and the ship nearly topples
with weakening masts and sails.
Decks and compartments rattle,
stacked within the hull.
Men pull at the ropes
in pain, while others are ill.
Sailors are wounded by wind;
bodies give up souls.
The mast's might is useless,
the veteran's wiles as well.
The cedar poles are like straw;
the cypress snaps like a reed.
Ballast of iron and sand
is tossed about like hay,
and all pray in their way—
but you turn to the Lord,
remembering how He parted
the Jordan and Moses' Sea,
extolling Him who stills
the waves that toss up mire—
recalling your purity's merit,
as He recalls your fathers'.
His miracles he renews,
and you the Levites' song—
as spirit returns to flesh,
and life to your dry bones.
The water then grows still,
like flocks of sheep on hills,
and the sun goes down as night
ascends with its hosts and moon—
a dark woman wearing
a gown of violet and gold.
Stars in the currents stray,
like exiles driven from homes;
their image is there in the light,
in the heart of the sea, ablaze,

as the water's surface and sky
shine like polished gems.
The abyss looks just like the heavens,
the two great seas are bound—
and my heart, a third, between them,
pounds with waves of praise.

MY SOUL LONGED

My soul longed for the house of assembly
and trembled as fear of leaving came through me;
but the heavens conspired to ease my departure,
and I found His name in my heart to help me.

Therefore I'll offer Him thanks with each step,
and bow before Him the length of the journey.

HAS A FLOOD WASHED THE WORLD

Has a flood washed the world to waste?
Is there no dry land at all to be seen?
No man, no beast, no bird of the air?
Have all perished, lain down in pain?
The sight of a hill or reef would comfort me,
a stretch of empty desert delight me.
I gaze in every direction around us—
nothing but ship and sky and sea,
as Leviathan churns the deep and it seems
white hair sprouts across the abyss.
The sea's heart turns on the craft—
pouring its waters across its boards;
and the waves rage as my soul rejoices,
nearing the sacred shrine of her Lord.

IN THE HEART

I tell the heart in the heart of the seas,
as the pounding waves bring on its fear:
If your faith is firm in the Lord who made
the sea—whose name endures for eternity—
the deep won't frighten you with its swells,
for He who sets its bound is near.

ABOVE THE ABYSS

Heart sinking, knees buckling, I cry
out to God, fear coursing through me:
astonished oarsmen and sailors—helpless above
the abyss—feel their hands failing them,
and I there on the deck of the ship in the winds
as well, between sky and sea, dangling—

stagger and reel. . . . But all this is nothing—
beside the way I'll dance within you, Jerusalem.

TIME HAS TOSSED ME

Time has tossed me toward Egypt's deserts,
but tell it to hurl me further and turn
until I see the desert of Judah
and reach that gentle northern land.
I'll wrap myself there in His name's glory,
and beneath His sanctity's crown I'll whirl.

BE WITH ME

At Zo'an be with me, on the mountain and sea,
and I'll turn toward Shiloh and the shrine in ruin,
and follow the path of the covenant's ark,
and kiss the honeyed dust of its tomb.

I'll see the fair one's forgotten nest,
where doves were banished—and crows now rest.

ALONG THE NILE

Has Time taken off its clothes of trembling,
and donned its finest gown and jewels?
Is earth now wearing robes of linen,
richly woven and threaded with gold?
The land along the Nile is checkered,
as though with the priestly breastplate and vest,
and the desert oases are carpets of color;
Ramses and Pithom in bronze are decked.
Girls wander beside the river
just like does of gazelles but slower—
their hands weighed down by bracelets of brass,
their gait constrained by bangles and anklets.

The heart, forgetting its age, is lured
and finds itself thinking of Egypt's Eden,
its young there by the river's gardens,
along its banks, and across its fields,
where the wheat has turned a reddish gold,
as though it too had been dressed in robes,
and a breeze from the sea ripples across it,
so it seems to be bowing—in thanks to the Lord. . . .

THIS BREEZE

This breeze of yours is scented, West—
its wings are fragrant with apple and balm;
you've clearly come from the spice-traders' chests
and not from the heavens' stores of wind.
You spread the feathers of birds, and free me,
like scent wafting from purest myrrh.
We've all longed and waited for you,
prepared to ride the sea on a board,
so do not lift your hand from the sails,
whether the day declines or dawns,
but pound the deep and rend its heart
until you've reached the holy hills,
rebuking the East and its gales which cause
the sea, like a cauldron, to swell and seethe.
But what could one do, held back by the Lord,
bound today and tomorrow released?
My prayer's answer is in His hand—
who forms the mountains, and fashions the wind.